

‘Rape’ in the Syntax of 2 Samuel 11:4

The character of Bathsheba is the subject of wide and varying interpretation. She has been understood as everything from an innocent victim, to a surviving opportunist, or mastermind schemer. Many convincing arguments have been put forward in support of her innocence. Yet, what no one has observed, and what I hope to contribute, is that the syntax of 2 Samuel 11:4 actually signals that this was a non-consensual sexual violation, what we call ‘rape.’ The surrounding context supports this reading, as well as the early translations and rabbinic material. We will proceed by briefly discussing what has been said before presenting a unique contribution concerning verse 4 specifically.

The Discussion Thus Far

Many scholars have made contributions to the position that Bathsheba was innocent.¹ Regarding verse 4 specifically, Moshe Garsiel has argued that “the series: ‘he saw...sent...inquired...sent...took her...lay with her...’ indicates that the main initiative was David’s and believes that the ‘taking’ implies coercion.”² Jan P. Fokkelman thinks that the curtness of the phrase ‘he took her’ reveals a “sudden, moral brutality...which reduces the other partner to a mere object of desire.”³ Walter Brueggemann notes, “There is no conversation. There is no hint of caring, of affection, of love—only lust. David does not call her by name, does not even speak to her. At the end of the encounter she is only ‘the woman.’”⁴

Some argue that the phrase וַתָּבֹא אֵלָיו “she came to him” interrupts the rush through five verbal clauses, indicating that she was a willing participant.⁵ Others think that it simply indicates her subordinate status, as the same words are used of Uriah, who “came to him” after being sent for in 11:7.⁶ Garsiel notes that Bathsheba probably did not know why she was being summoned, so there would have been no reason for her to

¹ See especially Sara M. Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba? A Study in Characterization* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2011).

² Moshe Garsiel, “The Story of David and Bathsheba: A Different Approach,” *CBQ* 55 no 2 (1993): 255.

³ J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Volume 1: King David (11 Sam 9-20 and 1 Kings 1-2)* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 52.

⁴ 2Sam 11:5; Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel, Int* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 273.

⁵ George G. Nicol, “The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba: Some Observations on Ambiguity in Biblical Narrative,” *JSOT* 73 (1997): 49; Lillian R. Klein, “Bathsheba Revealed,” in *Samuel and Kings: a Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 49; Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: the Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10-12*, *JSOTSup* 75 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), 88.

⁶ Gina Hens-Piazza, “Terrorization, Sexualization, Maternalization: Women’s Bodies on Trial” in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible*, ed. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *SemiaST* (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 166; Hyun Chui Paul Kim and M. Fulgence Nyengele, “Murder S/He Wrote: a Cultural and Psychological Reading of 2 Samuel 11-12,” in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible*, ed. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *SemiaST* (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 104.

resist “coming” to the king.⁷ Her obedience therefore does not signify compliance. It is also important to note that the phrase וַתָּבוֹא אֵלָיו “she came to him” is a textual variant, and the Septuagint omits it. This could be because the phrase is not original to the text, or it could have been omitted to emphasize that it was not consensual.

Some point out that the text does not say that Bathsheba resisted or cried out for help, yet Sandie Gravett notes that Dinah also did not cry out against Shechem in Genesis 34 and provides ample reasons for interpreting it as rape.⁸ Elna Solvang compares Bathsheba’s status as a woman to Sarah’s in Gerar in Genesis 20, who also did not object when Abraham gave her to Pharaoh, and thinks that Bathsheba may have found herself in a similar situation, believing that ‘no’ was not an option and that resistance to the king might result in harm to herself, her husband, and even her father.⁹ Whilst it is true that Tamar is reported as resisting in 2 Samuel 13, she also did not “cry out” and she did not resist a king, but rather, another member of the royal family.¹⁰ As Katharine Doob Sakenfeld points out, “the power differential between the king and any ordinary woman... would have been huge.”¹¹ Ilse Müllner states, “sind es insbesondere die Machtverhältnisse, die eine Rede von sexueller Gewalt angemessen erscheinen lassen.”¹²

Many note that Bathsheba is never blamed for the affair in the wider context of chapters 11 and 12, by the narrator, Nathan or God. David alone is accused.

Brueggemann calls attention to the fact that the same word לָקַח is used in Nathan’s parable, and thinks that with the words “lie” and “took” there is an accusation of rape.¹³ However, what he has not observed, and what I hope to show, is that when we compare the specific syntactical construction used in 11:4 to other biblical rape passages we see that it is signaling, explicitly, that this was a sexual violation, a rape.

A final observation should be made about Sandy Gravett’s work concerning how forcible, non-consensual sexual intercourse, what we call ‘rape,’ is described in biblical narratives, images and laws.¹⁴ She notes the varied language employed to describe such

⁷ Garsiel, “Story,” 256.

⁸ Sandie Gravett, “Reading ‘Rape’ in the Hebrew Bible: A Consideration of Language,” *JSOT* 28 no. 3 (2004): 279-99, here 281-82.

⁹ Elna Solvang, *A Woman’s Place is in the House: Royal Women of Judah and Their Involvement in the House of David* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 130.

¹⁰ Tamar resists Amnon and attempts to talk him out of it, but she does not “cry out” within city limits either. Ilse Müllner (*Gewalt im Hause Davids. Die Erzählung von Tamar und Amnon (2 Sam 13, 1-22)* Herders Biblische Studien 13 (Freiburg: Herder, 1997), 94-95) compares Tamar’s resistance to a royal command to Uriah’s, but the power differential between both Bathsheba and Uriah, ordinary people, and the king himself was much larger than between two members of the royal family. Amnon was heir to the throne, and as a male heir he certainly had a higher status than Tamar, but he was not king yet.

¹¹ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power & Survival in the Old Testament & Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 73.

¹² Müllner, *Gewalt*, 96. Müllner (*Ibid*, 95-96, 94) does not think that the text itself presents the encounter as an act of violence, and that this leaves the door open for interpreters to blame Bathsheba. Yet, we will see that the text does not actually leave this door open, as the syntax signals that this was a rape.

¹³ Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 280. Brueggemann’s intuition that there is an accusation of rape with these words, is not quite the same as arguing that they are a euphemism for it, and that 11:4 explicitly signals this by using the same words as Gen 34:2 and a similar construction to Duet 22: 25, 28. My analysis will show that his intuition is correct.

¹⁴ Gravett, “Rape,” 280.

assaults and argues that whilst there is no Hebrew word for ‘rape’ equivalent to ours in English, we should pay particular attention to the way that the text uses typical verbs for sexual intercourse in non-typical ways to depict sexually violent acts like rape.¹⁵

Pertinent to our discussion is her treatment of the word לָקַח with reference to Shechem’s rape of Dinah in Genesis 34:2. She argues that the verb לָקַח indicates force and violence in a number of biblical texts, just as it conveys violence on the part of Shechem, and that the combination of it with a typical verb for sexual intercourse שָׁכַב in Genesis 34:2 indicates rape.¹⁶

There is some debate as to whether the word “rape” should be used in translation, since in the biblical world, sexual assault was understood as a crime against the man who held ownership over the woman’s sexuality, the father or husband, rather than as an act of sexual violence against the woman herself.¹⁷ However, if the reader is to understand the text as the original audience would have, then it must be translated in a way that communicates the same cognitive understanding of events. The word ‘rape’ most clearly communicates to a contemporary reader the same violation that a number of Hebrew euphemisms would to an ancient audience, and as Gravett observes, whilst “ancient readers possessed familiarity with the colloquial expressions that made the actions described clear, modern readers simply lack the cultural contexts to accomplish such connections and to understand these texts as about rape unless the translator renders them as such.”¹⁸ As Gravett states, “reading ‘rape’ does not alter the events that various texts describe, but rather, captures horrifying moments...of personal, sexual, emotional, and societal violation...with clarity for an English reader.”¹⁹

A New Contribution

Whilst scholars have made many important contributions to the position that Bathsheba was innocent, no one has observed that the syntax of verse 4 specifically signals that a sexual violation has occurred. What I hope to show, and contribute to the discussion, is that the syntax of 2 Samuel 11:4 is actually quite similar to other biblical rape texts, and uses a similar euphemism to signal, explicitly, that Bathsheba was raped.

Pertinent to our understanding of this passage is the term לָקַח “to take.” The typical phrase used in the Hebrew Bible for taking a wife in marriage was לָקַח אִשָּׁה,²⁰ but merely taking a woman, לָקַח without אִשָּׁה, outside of marriage, was considered a base act.²¹ There are many passages that refer to consensual sex outside of marriage, and

¹⁵ Gravett, “Rape,” 280, 284.

¹⁶ Gen 14:12; 1Sam 2:16; 5:1; 2Sam 8:1; 2Kgs 18:32; 23:34; Job 40:24; Prov 6:25; Ibid, 282, n. 10, 285.

¹⁷ Ibid, 280.

¹⁸ Ibid, 297, 293.

¹⁹ Ibid, 298.

²⁰ Gen 4:19; 11:29; 20:2; 24:3; Hos 1:2; Seebass, “לָקַח,” TDOTTE, 8:19; P. J. J. S. Els, “לָקַח,” NIDOTT, 2:816.

²¹ Seebass, “לָקַח,” TDOTTE, 8:19; Gen 34:2.

most of these use some form of the phrase [direct object]-יָבֹא אֵל- “to go into/enter” or [direct object]-שָׁכַב עִמְ- “to lie with.”²² Of note is the fact that the former phrase is used the second time that David sleeps with Bathsheba in 12:24, after their child has died, but not the first time in 11:4.

Unlike these cases, the reports of rape in the Hebrew Bible use somewhat different constructions. Take for example Amnon’s rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:14. It uses the construction וַיִּחַזֵּק מִמֶּנָּה וַיַּעֲנֶה וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֹתָהּ “he was stronger, he humiliated/humbled her, he lay with her.” Also note the passages prohibiting rape in Deuteronomy 22. Verse 25 says וְהִזְזִיק בָּהּ הָאִישׁ וְשָׁכַב עִמָּה “if he seizes the woman and lies with her,” and verse 28 says וַתִּפְשֶׁה וְשָׁכַב עִמָּה “if he seizes her and lies with her.” The rape of the Levite’s concubine by the men of Gibeah in Judges 19:25 is reported as: וַיִּחַזֵּק הָאִישׁ בְּפִילְגָשׁוֹ וַיֵּצֵא אֲלֵיהֶם הַחוּץ וַיִּדְעוּ אוֹתָהּ וַיַּתְעַלְלוּ-בָּהּ כָּל-הַלַּיְלָה “the man seized his concubine, and made her go out to them in the street, and they knew her, and abused her all night.” Most important for our discussion is the description of Shechem’s rape of Dinah in Genesis 34:2: וַיִּקַּח אֹתָהּ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אִתָּהּ וַיַּעֲנֶה “he took her and he lay with her and he humiliated/humbled her.” This passage uses the same words as 2 Samuel 11:4 for “he took her...and he lay with her” שָׁכַב...לָקַח, and is describing a rape. Whilst 2 Samuel 11:4 does not have a form of עָנָה “to humiliate/humble” at the end like Dinah’s and Tamar’s rape passages, neither do the Deuteronomic law passages that are prohibiting rape. They have only חָזַק and תָּפַשׁ, verbs for “to seize/take,” combined with שָׁכַב עִמָּה “to lie with.” What I would suggest is that 2 Samuel 11:4 uses a similar verb for “to seize/take” לָקַח with שָׁכַב עִמָּה to describe rape. The same verb לָקַח “to seize/take” is used with שָׁכַב to indicate rape in Genesis 34:2. If 2 Samuel 11:4 were describing consensual sex outside of marriage, it would have used [direct object]-יָבֹא אֵל- “to go into/enter,” as it does in David and Bathsheba’s second sexual encounter in 2 Samuel 12:24, or [direct object]-שָׁכַב עִמְ- “to lie with” without לָקַח.

Whilst Koenig maintains that there are no other words that indicate force or humiliation in 2 Samuel 11, לָקַח does indicate force and violence in a number of biblical passages, including its five occurrences directly before verse 4 and its five occurrences directly after, so that the surrounding context supports this use of the verb.²³ Koenig suggests that David lays “with” Bathsheba עִמָּה in some sort of relational configuration, whilst Amnon simply ‘lays’ אֹתָהּ Tamar,²⁴ as Shechem ‘lays’ אִתָּהּ Dinah in Genesis 34:2. However, the Deuteronomic law texts concerning rape also use עִמָּה, rather than אִתָּהּ, so this cannot be said to be determinate for relational and non-relational sexual encounters. The encounter between David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11:4 is described

²² Gen 38:16, 18; 39:12, 14.

²³ Koenig, *Bathsheba*, 69-70. 2Sam 8:1, 7, 8, 9:5; 10:4 and 2 Sam 12:4, 9, 10, 11; 12:30 all indicate force or violence.

²⁴ Ibid.

with the same combination of words used in Genesis 34, וַיִּקְחָהּ...וַיִּשְׁכַּב, with a similar syntactic construction as the rape passages in Deuteronomy 22, a verb for “to seize/take” combined with שָׁכַב עִמָּה “to lie with,” so that the author is indicating that Bathsheba was in fact raped. 2 Samuel 11:4 is using typical verbs for sexual intercourse in a non-typical way to depict a sexually violent act: rape.

The context supports this. Bathsheba is never blamed for the affair, by the narrator, Nathan or God, and this makes it highly unlikely that the sexual encounter was consensual. She is not included in the judgment of David in 11:27, which states:

וַיֵּרַע הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה דָּוִד בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה “but the thing that David had done was evil in the Lord’s eyes.” There are many places in the Hebrew Bible where both the man and woman are condemned if they are both responsible.²⁵ The implication is that Bathsheba was not mentioned because she was not responsible, and she was not responsible because she did not consent. Nathan’s parable reinforces her innocence because the little ewe-lamb who represents Bathsheba was a victim. The lamb did not plan to run away with the rich man, seduce him, or trick him into killing her owner; she was taken.

Further support for this understanding of the syntax of verse 4 is seen in the earliest versions and traditions, those closest to the biblical text, which either completely omit the phrase “she came to him,” making all the action David’s, or explain that it was “under compulsion.”²⁶ As previously noted, the LXX omits the phrase “she came to him” and has instead καὶ ἔλαβεν αὐτήν, καὶ εἰσῆλθεν πρὸς αὐτόν “and he took her and went into her.” The Syriac Peshitta also omits the phrase, reporting that “David sent a messenger, and brought her, and slept with her,” making David alone responsible.²⁷ The Aramaic Targum does have the phrase “she came to him” but seems to emphasize that the messengers brought her under compulsion by stating “David sent a messenger to lead her and she came to him...” וַשְׁלַח דָּוִד אֶזְגִּידִין וּדְבָרָה וְאַתָּת לֹוֹתִיָּה וּשְׁכִיב עִמָּה.²⁸ B. Ketub. 9a explains that she came to David “under compulsion.”

It is noteworthy that whilst both the Midrash and Talmud attempt to whitewash David’s character by providing justifications for his behaviour,²⁹ neither attempts to excuse him by transferring this blame to Bathsheba, which would certainly have helped them in their agenda. This is even more odd given the negative views of women expressed elsewhere in these traditions.³⁰ Transferring the blame to a woman would have been the easiest way of removing it from David, and this is precisely what happens in the

²⁵ I.e. Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 and Jezebel and Ahab in 1 Kings 21.

²⁶ Josephus is the exception. He (*Ant.* 7.130) omits the phrase, yet writes (*Ant.* 7.131) that after she became pregnant, she asked David to “contrive some way of concealing her sin, for according to the laws of the fathers she was deserving of death as an adulteress.” However, it is noteworthy that the Midrash and Talmud do not follow Josephus in this interpretation of her.

²⁷ Donald M. Walter et al., *The Syriac Peshitta Bible with English Translation: Samuel* (Piscataway, N.J.: Gorgias, 2015), 260-261.

²⁸ Eveline Van Staaldue-Sulman, *The Targum of Samuel* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 546.

²⁹ See b. *Sanh.* 107a and the explanations by Raba the sage, b. *Abod. Zar.* 4b-5a, b. *B. Mes.* 58b, b. *Ketub.* 9b and b. *Šabb.* 56a.

³⁰ See B. *Ta’an.* 24a, which blames women for male lust. b. *Ned.* 20a says that those who gaze at women will come to sin and that even the sight of her heel leads to degenerate children. Both depict women as temptresses.

history of interpretation later.³¹ Yet these early commentators do not attempt to make him look less guilty by blaming her, and instead, present her quite favorably.³² I would like to point out how strange this is and how unlikely they are to have done this unless they knew that the text was describing a non-consensual sexual encounter. The fact that they do not blame her, and instead, shield her from it, by explaining that she came to him “under compulsion,” seems to indicate that they did not see her as a willing participant. It seems plausible that this was because they knew that the syntax of 2 Samuel 11:4 was signaling that a sexual violation had occurred. They were attempting to preserve her innocence without doing further damage to David’s name.

3. Conclusions

The sexual encounter between David and Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11:4 was a rape. The syntax of verse 4 signals this by using a euphemism with a similar syntactical construction to the ones that indicate rape in Genesis 34:2 and Deuteronomy 22. The wider context supports this, as well as the early versions and rabbinic material, which either completely omit the phrase ‘she came to him’ or explain that it was ‘under compulsion.’ It is clear that the earliest versions and traditions, those closest to the biblical text, consistently exonerate Bathsheba from blame.³³ Whilst Bathsheba is often championed as a politically calculating seductress, or at least a willing participant in an ‘affair,’ we have seen that both characterizations are inaccurate. Bathsheba was innocent. In this passage we encounter a rape, not a candid love affair. If the early rabbis were so careful to have shielded her from blame, perhaps we should do so as well.

³¹ See Martin Luther (*Works*, vol. 54, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan et al., (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986), 144), who blames her for causing David to trip “over a couple of pigtales” and calls (Ibid, 13: 205) her a “domestic enemy, the house devil...with her beautiful face and her smooth tongue.”

³² See Koenig, *Bathsheba*, 142-60. They make no mention of God judging or forgiving her, which suggests her innocence, and B. Ketub. 9a explains that she came to David “under compulsion.”

³³ Josephus is the exception, but the fact that the Midrash and Talmud do not follow him in his negative interpretation, particularly when they take negative views of women elsewhere, is significant.